

WHO waters down draft strategy on diet and health

A politically “softer” final draft of WHO’s draft global strategy on diet, physical activity, and health, released on April 19, has been cautiously welcomed both by antiobesity campaign groups and the USA—a major WHO critic—but has drawn fire from the powerful and defiant sugar industry.

“We welcome the general thrust of the new revised strategy in mastering the focus on addressing the global diet”, said Neville Rigby, director of policy at the UK-based International Obesity Task Force. “There are clear messages in this for governments to look at for key policy issues—such as protecting children, particularly in schools, and examining fiscal policies and how they affect consumption.”

He said the strategy still throws out the challenge to transnationals that control many sectors of the food

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Physical activity plays an important role in preventing non-communicable diseases

supply to work together to become part of the solution.

The draft says unhealthy diets and physical inactivity are among the leading causes of major non-communicable diseases including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

Obesity and raised cholesterol concentrations are major risk factors for

non-communicable diseases, the report states, and recommends that people limit their consumption of foods high in fat, sugar, and salt.

Additions on the role of education, exercise, and personal initiative helped mellow the USA’s stance.

“We think this is moving in the right direction; it’s clearly encouraging”, said a

US health spokesman, adding that the final text is now being reviewed.

But in a bid to get a consensus text, the new version has removed a controversial paragraph in the previous version that referred to the joint WHO/FAO technical report, 916, and which called for its recommendations to be translated into national guidelines.

Now, 916 is relegated to a footnote, but the thrust of its conclusion, say officials, make a reappearance in guise throughout the text.

The final version also retains the provocative sections on taxation, marketing, advertising and sponsorship, and promotion.

However, the US sugar industry remains adamant.

Andrew Briscoe, president of the influential Sugar Association, which represents US sugar cane and beet growers, said: “Basically our position has hasn’t really changed. [The text] directly or indirectly refers to 916, which we feel is not based on preponderance of science and lacks an economic impact study.”

How the text fares at coming annual WHO World Health Assembly in May could hinge on the stance taken by the G77 group of developing countries spearheaded by Brazil and other sugar exporters.

John Zarocostas

Court rules girl can take sex-change therapy

A 13-year-old Australian girl will be allowed to take hormone treatment as a possible prelude to sex-change surgery, in a case which has divided local doctors, politicians, and ethicists.

The girl will be given a combination contraceptive pill until she is 16 to suppress her periods. After her 18th birthday she will be allowed to consider gender reassignment surgery.

The ruling was backed by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists but criticised by the Australian Medical Association. AMA president Bill Glasson said it gave a mixed message to the public. “On one hand we’re saying . . . 13-year-olds are not allowed to go and see their doctor unless their parents are with them and the parents have access to their medical information”, he told ABC radio. “Yet on the other hand we’re saying yes a child, a 13-year-old child, has the ability to receive full informed consent about such an important decision as far as changing your sex.”

Despite having developed breasts and started menstruation, Alex lives as a boy. The court was told that she beats other boys at arm-wrestling and plays in the otherwise all-male cricket team, and wore nappies to school because she refused to use the girls’

toilets and was not allowed to use the boys’.

She had been inseparable from her father as a child and was profoundly upset by his death when she was 5 or 6 years old, but disliked her mother and stepfather and lived with her aunt.

The court heard that she believed she could still communicate with her father, but was told that the delusion and her desire for a sex change were not the result of depression or suicidal ideation.

“That’s a silly thing. I have a normal life. I want to be male and play with other males. My mother prohibited me from this”, she was quoted as saying.

Politicians on both sides of the Tasman Sea have been divided by the ruling. Georgina Beyer, a transsexual member of parliament in New Zealand’s ruling Labour party, cautiously applauded the court’s “remarkable and brave” decision.

But Australian prime minister John Howard said the “very, very difficult” case could have gone beyond the jurisdiction of the family court. “I’m thinking about it and just wondering whether it was the right decision”, he told 2UE radio. “It’s the age factor that bothers me, it really does.”

David Fickling